

What is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 really about?

by Rev. Tom Aicken

Let me say at the outset that the best and most thorough treatment of this subject I have found is by Charles Hodge, who has followed in the same track of careful scholars before him, and for those who would like to study it further I highly recommend his commentary on the Corinthian Letters.

Back now to the question at hand. 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is not about women wearing hats in church as too many people have come to believe. Regrettably, that focus is a distraction, taking our attention right away from what is really taught in this passage - nor does it even refer to hats, but to veils, which were worn by women in ancient Corinth not only to cover the top of their head but part of their face as well, and they would put one on every time they left home to walk about in public. Are women who wear hats in church prepared to switch to veils, and to wear them in all public places? Yet, either way, whether hats or veils, this passage directs our attention to a much bigger and broader subject than that, as I hope to open up in our exploring it together. I want to point out that my purpose here is not to get women to remove their hats in church - not at all - my purpose is only to open up the real meaning of the passage before us, and, in doing so, to address the much bigger and more pressing issues of our own day.

The real subject of this passage is found in v.3. Paul wants us to know the three headships listed here, particularly the headship of the man over the woman, along with the dress code and general appearance it calls for before the eyes of others. There it is. This principle of male headship does not deny the equality of men and women (see Gen. 1:27 and Gal. 3:26-29), nor does it deny their mutual dependence (1 Cor. 11:11,12). We know, for instance, that the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are of one substance, equal in power and glory, yet just as the Son submitted Himself to the will of the Father when He became a man, so, too, in this present life men and women have very different roles to fulfill. The woman is to be subject to the man (see 1 Tim. 2:11-15), and she serves Christ best when she commits to that complementary function.

This brings us to the matter of the woman's appearance, how she should distinguish herself from her male counterpart in order to avoid confusion, and, at the same time, to show him due respect. Hodge wrote in 1857, "The principle insisted upon in this paragraph is that women should conform in matters of dress to all those usages which the public sentiment of the community in which they live demands. The veil in all eastern countries was, and to a great extent still is, the symbol of modesty and subjection. For a woman therefore in Corinth to discard the veil was to renounce her claim to modesty, and to refuse to recognize her subordination to her husband."

Note the point that is being made here. Women dress in different ways all over the world, and how they dress in Canada - what respect they show in doing so, and what that says to people of their own culture - may differ widely from how they dress and

what that says to people living in different places all around the globe. We don't all have to dress today, in other words, as they did two millennia ago in a landscape and culture far removed from our own. In first century Corinth, for example, immodest women were shaved as a punishment, and so, if a woman refused to wear her veil, it was the same as being shorn; it was a way of her proclaiming to all the people around her that she was a loose woman who didn't care about norms and customs and showing respect for other people. Today, if we were to see a woman who appeared shorn, we would probably take that as evidence of chemotherapy, not of her character, but how she dresses and appears to others still makes an important statement to everyone around her.

Note also that a man was not to wear a veil, or any attire appropriate only for a woman, and that was true for the same reason, for the statement it made to others. His wearing a veil would tell people that he didn't care about gender distinction, and that he was willing to behave shamefully before both God and his fellow man. The real point here, though, was not in the clothing itself, but in what it told others of that same time and culture what he thought about male headship and his attitude for or against God's own order. Today, if we see a man dressed in 'drag' (as it's called), is it not a profound declaration, loud and clear, of what he thinks of God Himself?

This passage, therefore, 1 Cor. 11:2-16, is not just about how we should dress for church. Remembering the key principle of v. 3, it's about honouring the Lord and respecting the God-given roles of our peers (men and women) wherever we go. If Paul mentions someone dressing with total disregard for corporate worship, which is to say how he or she will appear in the company of angels (see Heb. 12:22-24), the point of that is simply to show how much more disrespectful it is to God Himself for someone to do that even in the sabbath assembly. It's shameful and humiliating also to the angels into whose very presence such a person has entered (v. 10).

I should also point out that, while Paul rebukes the woman who fails to dress in appropriate apparel (v. 5), he is not thereby giving approval to her praying and prophesying in corporate worship. Disapproving of her appearance does not imply that God approves of her leading in services of worship. Clearly, both practices are condemned and for the same reason, that both defy the principle of male headship.

For those who think that this passage is all about women wearing hats (or even veils) in church, and how we must never abandon that practice, it's surely noteworthy that veils are not even mentioned in vv. 13-16. Now, you'll notice, the illustration shifts to the woman's long hair as her covering. What's this?? Well, as I said earlier, this passage is not first of all about veils at all, but about the headship of men over women and how that is to be expressed, not merely in words and works, but even in visible appearance. Veils were an eastern custom which were appropriate to that part of the world; the woman's long hair is more universally acknowledged even today, and is a custom we can relate to more readily also here in the west.

Two more points. First, Paul appeals to his readers to make a judgment for themselves in these matters (vv. 13, 14), a judgment based not on Scripture, notice, but on nature. Clearly, he's asking them to decide whether a woman should have longer hair than the man. Is it not a mark of her beauty and a means of distinguishing her from the man? This doesn't have the same weight of Holy Scripture, of course, but some things are plain enough even to common sense and reason.

Second, Paul concludes this passage (v. 16) by stating that nature itself teaches that men and women are to be distinguished from one another in their appearance, that length of hair and other local dress codes can help to establish that - unless, mind you, those dress codes are contrary to the Word of God. Ah, but there are no universal dress codes in the Bible apart from the prohibition of cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5). This, I would add, accepting what is most natural, plus local dress codes wherever possible, is part and parcel of the apostle's practice which he mentioned earlier (see 1 Cor. 9:22), namely, to be all things to all men, that he might by all means save some. (Some have interpreted v. 16 in a very different way, that churches have no custom to be contentious, but that is clearly incorrect. What Paul is advocating is length of hair and local dress codes for gender distinction, and is pointing out that, while some people may disagree with this principle, both the apostles and all the churches of God fully accept it.)

I want to appeal to the reader to consider the reasonableness of this historic understanding of 1 Cor. 11:2-16. It may have worked in the 1950's to tell women to wear a hat in church because that's what women did on all formal occasions anyway. They wore hats. But in the 2020's, when this is not our custom, it's adding an unnecessary burden to many and, in great measure, closing the door to effective outreach into the community around us. Do we really want to do that? Let's cling to what the Scriptures are meant to teach, not to inadequate interpretations imposed upon them and the arbitrary regulations they legislate.

Consider with me Matthew 23. One of two things Jesus condemns in this chapter is the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, but the other thing He condemns is their binding heavy and altogether unnecessary burdens on others (see v. 4). Let's search the Scriptures carefully, and make certain that we don't do that ourselves. Let's not oppose the prevailing culture unnecessarily or make anyone's burden heavier without good reason for doing so (Matt. 11:30).

In closing, let me draw your attention back once more to 1 Cor. 11:3. This, remember, particularly the headship of the man over the woman - and the importance, therefore, of gender distinction in even our physical appearance and dress code - is what this passage is really about. In our day, when the LGBTQ agenda is being thrust upon us, when teenagers suffering from gender dysphoria are receiving surgery and hormone therapy, and no one is allowed to counsel them (not even their parents) against it, 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is a key passage of Holy Scripture to which we need

to direct society's attention. And we need to begin within the covenant community of the church itself. Let's not quibble about women wearing hats in church when the real battleground here, with weapons already cocked and firing, is just to our left. Can we not see it? This is a passage that needs to be carefully expounded today, and it's precisely such an artillery encounter that it's intended to help believers address and defeat.